

Governor signs bill approving loans for aircraft safety equipment

By Rob Stapleton

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A bill to offer a low-interest loan program to aircraft owners who install a new digital link technology in their aircraft was signed by Gov. Sarah Palin on April 9 in Juneau.

Senate Bill 249, which Palin sponsored and introduced Jan. 25, provides Alaskan airplane owners the opportunity to use a new low-interest revolving loan program to purchase Capstone-like avionics equipment for their aircraft.

The technology, Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast, was tested in Alaska and was formally called the Capstone Safety Project.

ADS-B is a data link that uses ultra-high frequency radio to send and receive information about other aircraft that uses the technology. Along with multi-function screens and air traffic displays, the equipment also gives pilots graphical weather information, terrain maps and flight information, including temporary flight restrictions and notices to airmen. **ADS-B** is nearly 10 times more accurate than radar and operates in real time.

The \$4.8 million loan program for installation is offered through the state Department of Community, Commerce and Economic Development.

The program is also a key component to the Federal Aviation Administration's plans to adopt **ADS-B** throughout the state, according to the governor.

Statewide aviation officials, working in the Capstone Statewide Agreement Implementation Committee, last year signed a memorandum of agreement with the FAA to obtain \$34 million and equip 95 percent of the most frequently flown aircraft. If this is accomplished, the FAA has said that it will invest \$493 million in services and infrastructure improvements across Alaska.

Industry officials tried lobbying legislators for additional funding, but came up empty handed. That forced the idea of offering a 4 percent loan to commercial aviation operators, according to industry officials.

"This legislation is a crucial step to improving aviation safety," Palin said in a written release. "Studies have shown very significant improvements in aviation safety in the areas around Bethel and Southeast where the FAA has built ground stations and planes have been outfitted with the new equipment. We are hoping for similar results over a much larger area of Alaska."

Alaska has the highest number of pilots per capita of any state - about one in 78 Alaskans is a pilot. Alaska also has the highest aviation accident rates in the nation, three to four times higher than the national average for commercial aviation.

The FAA plans to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on ground stations that transmit the **ADS-B** signal, but it will be up to aircraft owners to outfit their planes.

FAA officials said nearly 4,000 aircraft statewide would need to install and use the equipment to justify spending nearly \$500 million now in the future.

The FAA recently announced it intends to have NexGen **ADS-B** installed at most high aviation traffic areas in U.S. and in Alaska by 2013, and will have the technology deployed nationwide by 2020.

NexGen is the FAA's official term for the next generation of aircraft control systems, also known as **ADS-B**.

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